

URBAN ANTICS!



What a Laugh!

Whoosh ... plop.
Here they come again, I thought, as a large brown-and-white bundle of feathers crash-landed on the verandah steps.

Within seconds there were three more. Then, as if on cue, the afternoon whistle from the Subiaco timber mill boomed and reverberated across town, heralding the home-coming of my grandad and the feeding of the kookaburras.

In those days, I was reluctant to get too close to the birds. To me, they were as big as our chooks and had an enormous beak just the right shape and size to carve up a curious small boy. Still, it was fun to place dobs of mincemeat along the verandah rail and watch as they hopped awkwardly on stumpy legs and tiny feet to flick the food skilfully down their cavernous throats.

Occasionally they would crack a beakful of meat on the rail in order to further stun or tenderise what would normally have been live prey.

The laughing kookaburra (*Dacelo novaeguineae*) of south-western Australia is the largest member of the kingfisher family. It was introduced into WA in 1897 from the eastern states, and it now lives here successfully in woodlands, open forests and

suburban areas which have adequate habitat and a food source.

Quite unlike other kingfishers, the laughing kookaburra is a bold bird, sedentary in its habits, and occupying the same territory the year round. As its common name implies, it has an extraordinary call. The sounds it makes range from a few chuckles to a pronounced *kooaaah*, but the main song is a rollicking laugh, usually sung in chorus.

Both sexes of the laughing kookaburra have similar plumage. They have an off-white to buff head and body, with a dark line through the eye. The back is dark brown, the wings brown with sky blue markings, and the tail is barred with rich brown and black leading to a white tip. The beak is black above and horn below.

Laughing kookaburras form permanent pairs and nest from September to January in a flat-floored cavity in a tree trunk, branch or termite mound. Two or three eggs are laid, which hatch at different times about 24 days later. The young fledge in 36 days, and are then looked after and fed for a further 8-13 weeks.

The family social system of the laughing kookaburras greatly contributes to the low death rate and low birth rate of these birds. The young are not forced to leave their parents' territory on reaching maturity, but stay on in the subordinate role of non-breeders (only the senior pair breed). These 'auxiliaries',

as they are known, defend territorial boundaries, rear and protect offspring, and occupy areas that would otherwise be taken over by breeders.

Although reducing breeding potential, the social system of kookaburras actually improves the chances of survival of all family members.

JOHN HUNTER

DID YOU KNOW?

- Laughing kookaburras can live 20 years if conditions are favourable. They 'laugh' to advertise their territory boundaries, then wait to hear the replies of neighbouring groups.
- They are not selective feeders; they prey on snakes, lizards, the odd small bird and rodents, but live mainly on insects, especially during plagues, and other invertebrates.
- Senior auxiliary family members move up to become breeders on the death of a family breeder, or they may go to newly vacant positions in a neighbouring group.

LANDSCOPE

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Each year more people seek wilderness experiences, but many are unprepared for the difficulties they might encounter. Learn about the basics of outback safety and bushcraft on page 35.



Botanists search for a eucalypt last seen by Giles in his expedition across WA deserts 115 years ago. See page 28.



Will the honey possum become a secondary victim of dieback disease? See page 22.



Australia is a land of lizards - tough competitors evolving amid spinifex and wildfires in the Great Victoria Desert. Turn to page 10.



Straight and vigorous pines don't grow by accident. Years of research and breeding have gone into producing the perfect pine. See page 49.

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COVER

The tiny honey possum (*Tarsipes rostratus*), seen in our cover illustration by Philippa Nikulinsky, feeds almost exclusively on nectar and pollen. However, most of its important food plants are threatened by dieback disease caused by the *Phytophthora* fungi. The endangered scarlet banksia (*Banksia coccinea*) is one plant species used by the possums that is highly susceptible to the dieback disease. See story on page 22.



Managing Editor: Ron Kawalikak
 Editor: David Gough
 Contributing Editors: Verna Costello, Tanyia Maxted, Carolyn Thomson
 Designers: Sue Marais, Sandra Mitchell, Stacey Strickland
 Finished art: Sandra Mitchell
 Advertising: Estelle de San Miguel ☎ (09) 389 8644 Fax: 389 8296
 Illustration: Ian Dickinson, Sandra Mitchell
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